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**“A PLACE WHERE EVERY DECENT GUY WILL FIND HIMSELF  
EVENTUALLY”**

Delineating the Friend Zone as a Site of Sexual Violence

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**by**

**Giorgia Lake Shields**

**Report**

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## **Abstract**

# **“A PLACE WHERE EVERY DECENT GUY WILL FIND HIMSELF EVENTUALLY”**

Delineating the Friend Zone as a Site of Sexual Violence

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Since emerging in the mid-1990s, the nature of the friend zone has solidified around a common social trope: oblivious and/or manipulative women relegate men to this platonic space, callously disregarding the entitled but unsatisfied male desire they have provoked. Due to the proliferation of this trope, particularly among the millennial generation, it is apparent that the friend zone has become part of a pop culture lexicon through which adolescents and young adults learn to experience and perceive cross-gender relationships.

The purpose of this report is to delineate and critically consider the conceptual components of the friend zone by which it has become an intelligible cultural construct. These concepts include cisheteronormativity, ambivalent sexism, sexual mythology, and masculinity policing behaviors in male homosocial spaces. Examining these conceptual features as they work with and through one another reveals that the friend zone is underpinned by patriarchal myths about gender and sexuality that, in turn, sustain status

quo beliefs about cross-cisgender relationships. These beliefs work to affirm and perpetuate the misogynistic logic of a culture that normalizes sexual violence against girls and women, further exacerbating their already disproportionate vulnerability to such violence. This report also serves as a starting point for future empirical research into the complexities and intersections of the friend zone discourse.

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## Chapter 1: “[W]orse than being told no”<sup>1</sup>: *Mapping the Friend Zone*

Defined in the most basic terms, the *friend zone* describes “[a] situation in which a friendship exists between two people, one of whom has an unreciprocated romantic or sexual interest in the other.”<sup>2</sup> However, an assumption of gender neutrality with regard to cultural understandings and implications of the friend zone discourse would be direly erroneous. Although the *situation* described by the term friend zone is not one that necessarily occurs under gender-specific restrictions, the *idea* of the friend zone itself is deeply gendered, as its specter is asymmetrically invoked in situations wherein the desirous party is male and the platonic party is female.<sup>3</sup> The existence of an implicitly masculine referent (i.e., subjective self) in purportedly neutral language is supported by feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon, who argues that, given the conceptual parallels between neutrality and objectivity in a patriarchal context, a neutral subject can only ever be a rational male subject.<sup>4</sup> Considering the presence of this unmarked male referent, and despite the practical reality that the ways in which the *term* friend zone is used by individuals to describe their own idiosyncratic relationships and experiences likely vary with some significance, it is important to emphasize that cultural *understandings of* (and thus, *messages disseminated by*) the idea of the friend zone

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<sup>1</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, “Friend Zone,” (2016), entry 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford Dictionary*, “Friend Zone,” (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Chelsea Buchler, “The “Friendzone”: Renegotiating Gender Performance and Boundaries in Relationship Discourse.” Undergraduate Honors Theses Paper 56, (2014). *Urban Dictionary*, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, (1987), 55.



typically retain this gendered imbalance.<sup>5</sup> Further, this gendered view in understandings and enactments of the friend zone discourse contributes to a set of attitudes and behaviors that contribute to a continuum of sexually violent experiences to which women are continually subjected.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of this report is to delineate the ideological foundations of the friend zone, and in so doing, to highlight and analyze the work this discursive concept does in service of the facilitation and normalization of sexual violence against women.

### **THE FRIEND ZONE: A BRIEF HISTORY**

Appropriately, the specific concept and terminology of the friend zone first appeared in American popular culture on a 1994 episode of the sitcom *Friends*.<sup>7</sup> In the episode, entitled “The One with the Blackout,” Chandler advises Ross that he must act quickly with regard to his romantic intentions with Rachel, lest he “end up stuck in the [friend] zone forever.”<sup>8</sup> Although it is likely that the general concept of such a social location predates its entry into the American pop culture lexicon, it is this media legitimization which ultimately set the status quo for friend zone discourse to follow for years to come: namely, that well-intentioned men get relegated to the friend zone by women who are either oblivious or manipulative, and that once this has occurred, it is unlikely that they will ever be able escape into the heterosexual fantasy for which they long.

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<sup>5</sup> Buchler, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Liz Kelly, "The Continuum of Sexual Violence," In *Women, Violence and Social Control*, edited by Jalna Hanmer and Mary Maynard, (1987), 46-60.

<sup>7</sup> Buchler, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> J. Astrof and M. Sikowitz, “The One with the Blackout,” (1994).; Buchler, 2014, 7.

By the early 2000s, the cultural understanding and deployment of the friend zone as a legitimate concept consisting of a relatively cohesive set of conceptual components and social applications was apparent, with its first appearance in 2003 on the popular online, open-source dictionary website [Urbandictionary.com](http://Urbandictionary.com).<sup>9</sup> Today, [Urban Dictionary](http://Urban Dictionary) is ranked as the 267<sup>th</sup> most popular website in the United States<sup>10</sup> and offers 123 entries defining the friend zone,<sup>11</sup> reflecting widespread colloquial engagement with the friend zone discourse. This widespread use is also reflected by representations of the friend zone on television and in film. A search for “friend zone” on [QuoDB.com](http://QuoDB.com), a search engine for TV and film quotes, yields 127 results, while a search for “friendzone” yields an additional 11 results.<sup>12</sup> These results included such popular teen and young adult programs as *Pretty Little Liars*, *Scrubs*, *Family Guy*, and *Glee*.<sup>13</sup> As I will show with this report, the implications of this extensive acknowledgement and acceptance of the friend zone as a legitimate social location are troubling.

### **FRIEND ZONE FRAMEWORK**

The friend zone discourse is constructed upon the foundation of normative gender roles. Upon this foundation, three complementary components function to construct the friend zone as a site ripe for sexual violence: (a) ambivalent sexist beliefs, (b) a collection of sexual myths, and (c) the deployment of masculinity policing language and behaviors

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<sup>9</sup> Buchler, 2014.; Rachel E. Smith, "Urban Dictionary: Youth Slangage and the Redefining of Definition," *English Today* 108, 27, No. 4, (2011): 43-48.

<sup>10</sup> Alexa, *Urbandictionary.com Traffic Statistics*, (2017).

<sup>11</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> *QuoDB*, "Friend Zone" search results, (2017).; *QuoDB*, "Friendzone," search results, (2017).

<sup>13</sup> *QuoDB*, "Friend Zone," 2017.

associated with male homosocial bonding. Specifically, I suggest that the friend zone is simply the most contemporary expression of a much older system of male ambivalence toward women, wherein women are cherished, protected, and desired for their appropriate performance of femininity (here, in the context of what is perceived to be a platonic friendship), but are rejected, reviled, and punished for transgressing these norms (by violating male expectations of feminine deference and sexual availability). Sexual myths then provide men with culturally acceptable sexual scripts, which can be acted out with little cause for concern about social or legal consequences. Among these are the beliefs that women and men are inherently different, that women are unknowable to men, that women are sexual objects, that women have sexual power over men, that men are entitled to women's bodies, that male sexuality is uncontrollable, that "nice guys finish last," and that even so, "real men" don't rape.<sup>14</sup> By utilizing these socially agreed-upon myths, sexual violence that occurs in the context of the friend zone discourse is legitimized as the natural outcome of women's disobedient exercise of sexual agency. Both the sexist beliefs and the sexual myths that construct this ideology of the friend zone are disseminated, interpreted, and internalized through the common practice of male peers' policing of one another's masculinity.

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<sup>14</sup> Devon L. Polaschek and Tony Ward, "The Implicit Theories of Potential Rapists: What Our Questionnaires Tell Us," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 7, (2002): 385-406.; C.J. Pascoe and Jocelyn A. Hollander, "Good Guys Don't Rape: Gender, Domination, and Mobilizing Rape," *Gender & Society* 30, No. 1, (2016): 67-79.

## IDEOLOGIES OF THE FRIEND ZONE

The online, crowd-sourced slang and pop culture glossary Urban Dictionary offers a uniquely helpful insight into the ways in which the friend zone is constructed and reconstructed by individuals in both online and real-life contexts. Urban Dictionary allows anyone to take part in the collaborative authoring process, offering a picture of the friend zone as it is explained, understood, and enacted (or received, as the case may be) by laypeople, rather than a single, static, neutral definition.<sup>15</sup> In accessing a diverse set of definitions, I seek to emphasize the salience of particular components that are repeatedly expressed in the friend zone discourse.

In her 2014 study, Buchler identified three common ideological tenets of the friend zone as depicted in media and Internet messages: (a) either an explicit or implicit expression of one party's sense of entitlement to the object of unrequited affection, (b) a typically explicit indication that the friend zone is an inherently negative location to find oneself in, and (c) a deep bifurcation in potential relationship outcomes, as the only acceptable response to rejection is to terminate the friendship.<sup>16</sup> The majority of user-submitted definitions found on Urban Dictionary are largely consistent with these parameters, as demonstrated by the user-ranked top two:

1. What you attain after you fail to impress a woman you're attracted to. Usually initiated by the woman saying, "You're such a good friend". [sic] Usually associated with long days of suffering and watching your love interest hop from one bad relationship to another.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Buchler, 2014, 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, 2016.

2. A state of being where a male inadvertently becomes a ‘platonic friend’ of an attractive female who he was trying to initiate a romantic relationship. [sic]<sup>18</sup>

These definitions clearly exhibit (a) an implied entitlement to the object of affection (described here, significantly, as necessarily female) and (b) a deeply negative sentiment with regard to being placed in the friend zone. However, contrary to Buchler’s third assertion, these definitions clearly suggest that friendships are often maintained as façades, rather than being swiftly terminated. Considering this discrepancy, the potential motivations behind the maintenance of a “friend” relationship despite feelings of antipathy bear critical examination.

Further exploration uncovers a wealth of definitions that utilize the discourse of the friend zone to bolster and perpetuate explicitly misogynistic beliefs:

9. A very frustrating and very shitty place to be. More commonly experienced by men than women. Mostly because [sic] of the fact that men are comfortable with being in a relationship/fucking a friend, where women will piss and moan about not wanting to ruin a friendship, somehow overlooking the fact that guys already have friends, and so do they. Stupid bitches.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike those above, this definition lays bare the antagonistic sentiments at its core, and is only one of many explicit descriptions of the friend zone as a site at which stupid, whiny, manipulative women victimize well-intentioned men, who will now probably have to die sad and alone. It is precisely this highly gendered and (implicitly or explicitly) misogynistic understanding of the friend zone that will be the focus of my analysis.

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<sup>18</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

## IDEOLOGIES OF THE FRIEND ZONE: SUPPORT

Further evidence of the consistency of this gendered conceptualization can be found with a quick Google search. While few academic publications thus far have elected to delve deep into the dark corners of the friend zone, a multitude of online publications and web sites offer a variety of think pieces and instructional guides to help woeful, would-be suitors convince unwilling women to love them, or at the very least to fuck them. While the finer details of these instructive pieces vary somewhat, they also bear some striking resemblances to one another. For instance, the work of Dr. Jeremy Nicholson, published via *Psychology Today*, offers an oversimplified, essentialist, and uncritical answer to questions about cross-gender friendship:

[M]en appear to be more likely to look at opposite sex friends as potential sexual and romantic partners. Women, in contrast, tend to prefer non-sexual friendships, which provide protection and resources... Thus, women tend to find it costly and onerous when male friends desire sex and romance. Men, in contrast, find the time and money demands costly and frustrating, particularly when their romantic desires are not reciprocated.<sup>20</sup>

This strikingly evolutionary perspective on the friend zone, notably left uncomplicated by the author, is very telling in its essentializing and misogynistic foundations. Most significant is the assumption that the supposed demands of “time and money” are at least *as* onerous as the much better-documented demands of “sex and romance” that women receive from men. In constructing this binary, these equivalencies are necessarily drawn, the most troubling of which being the unavoidable conclusion that men’s right to spend their time and money as they choose is of equal value as women’s right to be sexual

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<sup>20</sup> Jeremy Nicholson, "Can Men and Women be 'Just Friends'?", *Psychology Today*, (2013).

and/or romantic with whomever they desire (rather than whomever they are somehow indebted to).

Nicholson's conclusions about this supposed mismatch in needs with regard to cross-gender friendship is echoed by many other (mostly male) voices on the Internet. An article published by conservative online magazine, *The Federalist*, defines the friend zone as "a prison where women place any man they deem worthy of their time but not their hearts, men they'd love to have dinner with but, for whatever reason, don't want to kiss goodnight."<sup>21</sup> This definition may be the most telling of all, as it carries the painfully clear assumption that if a woman is not offering a man her "heart" (here, a potential stand-in for her vagina), then anything else she may have to offer him as a friend is ultimately worthless. Women are immediately placed in a socially undesirable category with this statement, worthwhile for love and sex but with little other obvious value. For this statement to be intelligible, both the author and his readers must function with the shared understanding that not only do women have little value beyond the provision of sexual pleasure (and perhaps other forms of traditionally uncompensated care work), but that women are in fact *actively detrimental* to men's lives and happiness when they step out of these boundaries. This is clear in the bitter rhetoric of the article's author, implicitly questioning "whatever reason" women might have to dare reject a goodnight kiss from a friend, clearly assuming that whatever this reason might be, it is inevitably rooted in selfishness and manipulation, and is therefore invalid. The article's author, Hans Fiene, continually uses the language of incarceration to paint readers a picture of

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<sup>21</sup> Hans Fiene, "Why Men and Women Can Never Be 'Just Friends,'" *The Federalist*, (2017).

what he imagines the friend zone to be. Words such as “prison,” “incarceration,” “trapped,” and “confines”<sup>22</sup> pepper the article, reminding readers that not only is the friend zone an awful place where mean women put helplessly love-struck men, but that it is, in fact, an inescapable love penitentiary from which no man is capable of escaping. Men’s capacity for simply realizing a woman is not interested in a romantic and/or sexual relationship and moving on is left largely unexplored by the author. Men, Fiene clearly thinks, should get the women they want, and women who do not want them should just get out.

#### **WHY STUDY THE FRIEND ZONE?: THE PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT**

The concept of the friend zone has proliferated on the internet and permeated mainstream popular culture to the extent that, as a term, it rarely warrants explanation, particularly to audiences under 40.<sup>23</sup> With the knowledge of this cultural permeation, evidence from both within the academy and without supporting a deeply gendered conceptualization of the friend zone as its primary and most socially salient form,<sup>24</sup> and its capacity to reify a status quo that positions men as sexual predators for which women are the prey, the friend zone discourse creates a new and specific context for the perpetration of sexual violence against women.

In addition to the widespread use of the friend zone discourse in general, the need for its closer examination only appears more crucial when considering the near ubiquity of the concept amongst American adolescents, teenagers, and young adults, referred to by

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<sup>22</sup> Fiene, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Buchler, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.; *Urban Dictionary*, 2016.



Buchler as “the friendzone generation.”<sup>25</sup> Although gender socialization is a life-long process, adolescence is known to be a time of particularly intensified gender socialization, often through the policing of gendered behaviors by peers,<sup>26</sup> which has obvious implications for understanding the friend zone discourse as it functions in young peoples’ lives. This is further emphasized by the social nature of the friend zone, as its intangibility relies upon peers’ shared understandings of its meaning to maintain both its legibility and its legitimacy. Furthermore, the majority of sexual violence against women is directed against adolescent and young women,<sup>27</sup> frequently by a member of a peer group. My analysis will focus, therefore, on the friend zone, its components, and its dynamics as they relate to adolescents and young adults.

Along with the components which comprise the friend zone itself, discussed in greater detail in the following chapters, it is vital to note that an analysis of this construct is incomplete without the added consideration of some of the relevant social contexts which have allowed the friend zone discourse to emerge in the first place. It is within these contexts that the full scale of the friend zone’s capacity for misogyny and sexual violence become clear. Two of the most salient of these contexts are (a) the almost unavoidable self-objectification of girls and women, and (b) a climate of sexual terrorism against girls and women.

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<sup>25</sup> Buchler 2014, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Deborah L. Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality*, (2002).; Christopher S. Reigeluth and Michael E. Addis, "Adolescent Boys' Experiences with Policing of Masculinity: Forms, Functions, and Consequences," *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 17, No. 1, (2016): 74-83.

<sup>27</sup> Carole Sheffield, "Sexual Terrorism," In *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, edited by Jo Freeman, (1994): 111-130, 120.

### **Context: Self-Objectification**

One vital social context through which the friend zone must be understood is that of women and girls' internalization of hegemonic norms of beauty and femininity. More specifically, the friend zone must be understood as a discourse which has emerged in a social setting in which girls and women's feminine socialization, if successful, is meant to subject them to what Vandenberg and Eggermont have identified as a "three-step process of self-objectification."<sup>28</sup> In this model, the process first involves the internalization of status quo standards of beauty and femininity, accepting them as both right and natural. Next, self-objectification may (and usually does) follow. When girls self-objectify, they stop viewing themselves as the subjects of their lives, instead developing an outsider's perspective of themselves with which to assess their physical appearance against their internalized ideals of beauty.<sup>29</sup> Finally, following self-objectification, many girls move on to its behavioral dimension, body surveillance, which may have a negative impact on mental health.<sup>30</sup> Further, self-objectification as a widespread phenomenon has been found to be experienced by virtually all girls and women in the West, although not uniformly.<sup>31</sup>

One particularly hazardous aspect of sexualization and self-objectification is the presupposed submissive heterosexuality accompanying these phenomena. When girls

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<sup>28</sup> Laura Vandenberg and Steven Eggermont, "The Three-Step Process of Self-Objectification: Potential Implications for Adolescents' Body Consciousness During Sexual Activity," *Body Image* 11, (2014): 77-80.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.; Laura Vandenberg and Steven Eggermont, "Understanding Sexual Objectification: A Comprehensive Approach Toward Media Exposure and Girls' Internalization of Beauty Ideals, Self-Objectification, and Body Surveillance," *Journal of Communication* 62, (2012): 869-887.

<sup>30</sup> Vandenberg & Eggermont, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.; Tolman, 2002.; American Psychological Association, *Report on the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*, (2007).

learn to view and assess themselves from a sexualized perspective, they must accept idealized traits as their own in order to conform. The feminine sexuality associated with the status quo, and thus the friend zone, is one in which girls and women must place men's needs and desires before their own. By emphasizing that they should privilege the male gaze and male desire, girls' own desires are silenced before they even emerge.<sup>32</sup> Girls learn that they are meant to be provocative but coy, sexy but not sexually experienced. They are meant to be physically attractive, sexually exciting, and adventurous enough to satisfy a monogamous, and necessarily male, partner. This narrow interpretation of satisfactory feminine sexuality along with the silence around feminine desire are obstacles to the development of a healthy sexuality, potentially leaving girls unable to articulate or even understand the range of these desires, let alone their boundaries. Developmental psychologist Deborah Tolman refers to this as a "dilemma of desire,"<sup>33</sup> and has found compelling evidence in her research to support that, in general, adolescent and teenage girls are faced with a choice either to resist normative gender socialization practices and risk being labeled deviant or "to capitulate to norms of femininity and disassociate from their true thoughts and feelings," which "makes it difficult for these girls to know and name sexual exploitation."<sup>34</sup> It is not an accident that girls' ability to make this identification is undermined by the very ideals they are told they should strive to embody. Compulsory heterosexuality, discussed in detail in chapter

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<sup>32</sup> Tolman, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 54.

two, offers highly restrictive gendered scripts for cross-gender interaction.<sup>35</sup> These scripts function to maintain and enforce normative gendered behaviors, particularly with regard to heterosexuality.<sup>36</sup> Taking these heterosexual scripts into consideration, the denial of girls' ability to identify violence committed against them is difficult to understand as anything but an intended outcome.

### **Context: Sexual Terror**

Working with and through women's sexual objectification is a continuum of near-countless sexually violent behaviors which culminate with the ideologies of objectification to produce a cultural climate of sexual terror against women and girls.<sup>37</sup> "Sexual terrorism,"<sup>38</sup> a term coined by feminist political science scholar Carole Sheffield, may carry a certain shock value, but her argument is deeply compelling. According to Sheffield, "terrorism aims to frighten, and by frightening, to dominate and control," which, she points out, is largely in line with the timeless patriarchal project of owning and controlling women's bodies.<sup>39</sup> Like political terrorism, sexual terrorism functions through ideology (patriarchy), propaganda (most popular media), indiscriminate violence (every girl and woman is a potential victim with virtually no exceptions), and voluntary compliance (normative gender socialization).<sup>40</sup> In addition, as with political terrorism, the crux of sexual terrorism lies in the reality that, for potential targets, violent victimization looms as a potential threat at every time and in every place. Unlike political terrorism,

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<sup>35</sup> Adrienne Rich, 1980. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, (1980): 631–660.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.; Tolman, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> Kelly, 1987.

<sup>38</sup> Sheffield, 1994.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 114.

however, where the victims are always innocent of causing the violence, society often blames victims for sexual violence rather than its perpetrators.<sup>41</sup> Behaviors which contribute to a culture of sexual terror populate a continuum of sexually violent experiences to which girls and women are regularly subject, from incidents which occur in women's lives on a quotidian basis such that they might be considered banal to the most violent and tragic of crimes against girls and women. Often, these incidences of sexual violence are linked to everyday details of masculine behavior, and are thus trivialized so that women typically choose to accept them as normal rather than to resist.<sup>42</sup>

Examining the emergence of the friend zone discourse within the broader social context of enduring sexual terror against girls and women, particularly when considering the additional impact of self-objectification, brings into stark relief the reality of what the friend zone represents at its core: an expression of embittered masculinity, disturbed both by women's willingness and ability to reject masculine heterosexual desire. Living in a climate of sexual terror warps girls' and women's ability to discern acceptable and unacceptable male behavior, leaving them vulnerable to sexual intimidation and violence and with no conceptual framework through which they might articulate their experiences.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Some important limitations should be noted with regard to the goals and scope of this project, which is to establish a conceptual map of the friend zone, a space wherein a

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<sup>41</sup> Sheffield, 1994, 114.

<sup>42</sup> Kelly, 1987, 50.

number of hegemonic presumptions about identity are made with regard to race and class, categories which go unmarked in virtually all definitions.<sup>43</sup> These aspects of identity expand and compound the complexities of gender and sexuality in ways that undoubtedly impact the meanings in and of the friend zone discourse in marginalized race- and class-specific contexts, as well as those in which both come into play. While the following analysis considers some of the ways in which race and class might impact aspects of the friend zone discourse in isolation, particularly when crossing intergroup boundaries and thus exacerbating the power imbalance, there is not enough empirical research on the friend zone discourse in practice to be able to do more than speculate about how it functions in communities and in the lives of folks with marginalized race and class identities.

In addition to the subordinated but still potentially heteronormatively-compliant gender identities of people of color and low-income people, there are also some considerations to be made with regard to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) identities and relationships and how these might interact with, or possibly interrupt, the friend zone discourse. Some of the most salient LGBTQ issues to the friend zone discourse are discussed in the following chapters—namely, the erasure of these identities—but, as the friend zone is an inherently cisheterosexual (and cisheterosexist) construct, many worthwhile questions and issues fall outside of the purview of the current project. For example, future lines of inquiry might consider ways of understanding the friend zone in spaces and amongst individuals where binary gender and sexual identities are rejected. MacKinnon argues that the social preoccupation with gender difference is more accurately understood as a masculine investment in dominance over women,

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<sup>43</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, 2016.

without which body and even gender differences do not necessarily disappear, but are also not understood as hierarchically linked to social power.<sup>44</sup> Might queer spaces or communities offer different directions for the friend zone discourse to take? Or might such spaces eliminate the conceptual need for the friend zone altogether? Future research on the friend zone might take questions such as these into consideration.

## CONCLUSION

Thus far, little academic attention has been paid to the concept of the friend zone, but its ubiquity in popular culture and its deeply gendered messages signal a need for the greater consideration of its forms and functions. As I have shown in this chapter, the discourse of the friend zone is highly gendered. In this discourse, ambivalent attitudes toward women contribute to the construction of the belief that men who are rejected by those with whom they have platonic friendships have been wronged, indicating that the friend zone is a contemporary expression of traditional gender and sexual norms.

Chapter two discusses the foundational norms of hegemonic masculinity, “emphasized femininity,” and compulsory heterosexuality as they pertain to the discourse of the friend zone. Normative gender and sexual ideals, and the difficulty of attaining them, are vital to the friend zone as its very existence relies upon the social scripts (or lack thereof) that arise in the face of failed heterosexuality. Chapter three discusses the critical role of ambivalent sexism in the friend zone discourse, as the friend zone is itself a deeply ambivalent construction. Chapter four discusses some of the sexual myths which

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<sup>44</sup> Catharine MacKinnon, “Difference and Dominance,” 1987, 40.

contribute to the construction and perpetuation of the friend zone discourse, including the myths that women are unknowable,<sup>45</sup> that women are sexual objects,<sup>46</sup> conversely, that women have sexual power over men,<sup>47</sup> that men in general are entitled to women, women's bodies, and women's unpaid care work,<sup>48</sup> that male (hetero)sexuality is naturally and uncontrollably voracious,<sup>49</sup> and that "nice guys" and "real men" do not, and perhaps cannot, commit acts of sexual violence.<sup>50</sup> Finally, chapter five discusses the role of peer-to-peer masculinity policing in the construction of the friend zone discourse. Given the integral nature of male homosociality to the construction of masculine hegemony,<sup>51</sup> the significance of male peer groups to the production of the friend zone discourse cannot be overemphasized.

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<sup>45</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002, 394.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 395.; Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Pleasure Under Patriarchy," In *Sexuality & Gender*, ed: Christine L. Williams and Arlene Stein, (2002), 33-45.; Deborah L. Tolman, Renee Spencer, Myra Rosen-Reynoso, and Michelle V. Porche, "Sowing the Seeds of Violence in Heterosexual Relationships: Early Adolescents Narrate Compulsory Heterosexuality," *Journal of Social Issues* 59, No. 1, (2003): 159-178.

<sup>47</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, (1989), 22.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, "An Ambivalent Alliance: Hostile and Benevolent Sexism as Complementary Justifications for Gender Inequality," *American Psychologist* 56, No. 2, (2001): 109-118.; Polaschek & Ward, 2002, 398.; Leana Allen Bouffard, "Exploring the Utility of Entitlement in Understanding Sexual Aggression," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 38, (2010): 870-879.

<sup>49</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002, 397.; C.J. Pascoe, "'Guys are Just Homophobic': Rethinking Adolescent Homophobia and Heterosexuality," In *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*, edited by Steven Seidman, Nancy Fischer and Chet Meeks, (2011):175-182.; Heather R. Hlavka, "Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse," *Gender & Society* 28, No. 3, (2014): 337-358.

<sup>50</sup> Pascoe & Hollander, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Cohan, "Adolescent Heterosexual Males Talk About the Role of Male Peer Groups in Their Sexual Decision-Making," *Sexuality & Culture* 13, (2009): 152-177.



## **Chapter 2: “The Quickest way a woman [has] to turn their guy friend gay”<sup>52</sup>: *Cisheteronormativity in the Friend Zone***

The belief in traditional, normative gender roles is the very foundation upon which the friend zone is built. These roles ascribe separate, although often complementary, traits and desires to men and women, which are then used as both prescriptions for appropriate gendered behavior and stereotypic tools for predicting the behavior of others based upon their perceived gender.<sup>53</sup> The normativity and widespread acceptance of these views can be attributed, at least in part, to the continued acceptance of biological determinism. Biological determinism suggests that the typical psychological and behavioral differences that are imagined to exist between men and women as generalizable groups are attributed to innate genetic differences between two discreet populations, rather than being the result of a lengthy history of gendered socialization practices.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to understanding feminine and masculine gender ideologies as separate constructs, it is also vital to investigate the ways in which they are positioned against one another, as well as the implications of this. While each construction has its own parameters, a comparison will quickly show that the boundaries of each are essentially defined by the other. Given the dominant social location of masculinity over femininity, this indicates that it is the downward boundary (from masculinity to

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<sup>52</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, 2016, entry 105.

<sup>53</sup> Nicola Gavey, *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*, (2005).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

femininity) that is the most dangerous to cross. There is, unsurprisingly, often a subsequent compulsion for men to eschew the trappings of femininity entirely.<sup>55</sup>

The acceptance of heteronormative gender roles is a crucial foundation of the construction of the friend zone discourse, as the very legibility of the concept of a friend zone relies heavily on socially agreed-upon sexual scripts to provide the template for (here, failed) heterosexual relationships. It is through the scripts of these prescriptive identity categories that the friend zone is produced.

### **HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY**

Hegemonic masculinity is an amalgamation of ideas about who “real men” are and what they are like (and, significantly, what they are not like).<sup>56</sup> The traits ascribed to men by hegemonic ideals are those that construct and maintain beliefs about the naturalness of a specific embodiment of masculine dominance. These traits include emotional stoicism and insatiable (hetero)sexual desire and prowess, among others.<sup>57</sup> Vital to understanding the function of hegemonic masculinity in the service of male dominance is its virtual unattainability in a real world context, and its tenuousness once it finally appears to be within reach.<sup>58</sup> Further, this (and all) masculinity is constructed hierarchically, with the domination of not just women but also of other men as an integral

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<sup>55</sup> Matthew Oransky and Jeanne Marecek, "'I'm Not Going to Be a Girl': Masculinity and Emotions in Boys' Friendships and Peer Groups," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 24, No. 2, (2009): 218-241.

<sup>56</sup> Amy C. Wilkins, "Masculinity Dilemmas: Sexuality and Intimacy Talk among Christians and Goths," *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 34, No. 2, (2009): 343-368, 343.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

aspect of its realization.<sup>59</sup> Necessarily, this creates an environment in which masculine hierarchies are constantly shifting, where the naïve platitude, “boys will be boys” “mandates and excuses the performance of aggressive heterosexuality among young men.”<sup>60</sup> In addition, the social expectation of male emotional detachment and stoicism incentivizes boys and men to dissociate from their own senses of compassion and empathy, which might otherwise serve to moderate their aggressive objectification and pursuit of girls and women.<sup>61</sup> For example, in the context of the friend zone, a young man who is kind to a young woman he is interested in may anticipate that his performance of this kindness as a heterosexualized strategy will produce in his target a reciprocal romantic or sexual interest—after all, this is how he has been taught to believe heterosexual relationships are *supposed* to work. Girls and women are not meant to be viewed as complex individuals with free will, but rather as a commodity to be earned, bought, or taken.<sup>62</sup>

Masculinity policing, discussed in detail in chapter five, offers a telling example of how men and boys hold one another accountable for the work of masculine status-building.<sup>63</sup> Masculinity policing can include “any action that serves to prevent or punish individual or group behavior perceived as insufficiently masculine.”<sup>64</sup> In the context of

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<sup>59</sup> R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, No. 6, (2005): 829-859.; Pascoe & Hollander, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Wilkins, 2009, 344.

<sup>61</sup> Pascoe, 2011, 181.

<sup>62</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002.; MacKinnon, 2002.

<sup>63</sup> Oransky & Marecek, 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Reigeluth & Addis, 2016, 75.

the friend zone, as well as male homosociality in general, masculinity policing often encourages sexually aggressive and violent behaviors.<sup>65</sup>

It is significant to note that in a white supremacist society, hegemonic masculinity also requires whiteness in order to be fully realized. This necessarily relegates men of color to positions of subordinated masculinity, forever falling short of hegemonic ideals. For some men of color, racialized masculinities evoke the specter of a predatory hypersexuality, while others may represent more passive, feminized stereotypes of manhood. For example, Black and Latino men are often seen as having insatiable and aggressive sexualities, as well as particularly misogynistic and hostile attitudes toward women in general (in comparison with white men).<sup>66</sup> Further, men of color are often perceived to be particularly fixated on the conquest of white women. However, other certain racialized masculinities, such as those of East Asian and South Asian men, are often stereotyped as embodying more passivity—though not necessarily more gender egalitarian beliefs.

In addition to marginalization by race, masculinity can also be compromised by low economic status. Masculine hegemony holds that men can and should be accumulators of wealth, particularly in comparison with women.<sup>67</sup> The hegemony of this gendered wealth imbalance results in the feminization of poverty, and by extension, the

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<sup>65</sup> Reigeluth & Addis, 2016.; Oransky & Marecek, 2009

<sup>66</sup> Audre Lorde, "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response," In *Sister Outsider*, by Audre Lorde, (1984): 72-80,74.; Lorena Garcia, "'Now Why do You Want to Know about That?': Heteronormativity, Sexism, and Racism in the Sexual (Mis)Education of Latina Youth," *Gender & Society* 23, No. 4, (2009): 520-541, 531.

<sup>67</sup> Dworkin, 1989, 20.

feminization of poor men.<sup>68</sup> This feminization necessarily degrades their masculinity status, ensuring that low-income men are relegated to subordinated positions within the hierarchy of masculinities.<sup>69</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, however, the sexual stereotypes associated with poor men largely frame their sexualities as aggressive and deviant.<sup>70</sup> This appears less at odds with feminization, however, when considering the ways in which subordinated femininities are also produced by marginalized race and class positions, discussed in greater detail below. This is also likely impacted by many poor men's intersectional positions, as class and race are closely linked in the public imagination.

In conjunction with the innate pressures of masculine hegemony, the increasing equality of women's rights in American society has caused an intensification of the tensions between hegemonic ideals of masculinity and the contemporary avenues available to men to achieve these ideals. These tensions manifest as "masculinity dilemmas" which must be rectified.<sup>71</sup> According to Korobov, women's resistance to emphasized femininity necessarily confounds men's capacity to meet hegemonic ideals, often leading young men to mitigate their individual sense of vulnerability by reframing female behavior as irrational or even intentionally cruel.<sup>72</sup> Another product of boys' and men's masculinity dilemmas is the emergence of what Bridges and Pascoe call "hybrid

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<sup>68</sup> Dworkin, 1989, 59.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Stevi Jackson, "Heterosexual Hierarchies- A Commentary on Class and Sexuality," *Sexualities* 14, No. 1, (2011): 12-20.

<sup>71</sup> Wilkins, 2009.; Pascoe & Hollander, 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Neill Korobov, "Young Men's Vulnerability in Relation to Women's Resistance to Emphasized Femininity," *Men & Masculinities* 14, No. 1, (2011): 51-75, 70.

masculinities.”<sup>73</sup> These hybrid masculinities emerge as an attempt to adapt to a social milieu in which the potential for future gender parity appears to loom large, a reactionary response to the dilemmas of seeking masculine perfection in a world which increasingly recognizes its potential harms. Hybrid masculinities seek to incorporate “elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and—at times—femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities,” obscuring the institutionalized privilege and power which is indelibly linked to Western manhood.<sup>74</sup> Some variations of hybrid masculinities which emerge, discussed in greater detail in chapter four, include those of the “nice/good guy”<sup>75</sup> and of the “real man,”<sup>76</sup> have serious potential ramifications for the friend zone discourse. Importantly, both hegemonic and hybrid expressions of masculinity play a role in constructing a discourse which denigrates men for insufficient expressions of masculinity and heterosexuality. In the context of the friend zone, masculine hegemony serves to narrate a predatory sexuality which boys and young men may seek to embody regardless of their own sexual desire.<sup>77</sup> Further, it encourages boys to disidentify with girls, reducing them to the level of object and leaving them vulnerable.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Tristan Bridges and C.J. Pascoe, "Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities." *Sociology Compass* 8, No. 3, (2014): 246-258.

<sup>74</sup> Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, 246.

<sup>75</sup> Pascoe, 2011.; Korobov, 2011.

<sup>76</sup> Pascoe & Hollander, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Tolman et al., 2003, 168.

<sup>78</sup> Cohan, 2009.

## EMPHASIZED FEMININITY

Emphasized femininity consists of a set of cultural attitudes which frame women as complementary, but necessarily subordinate, to men. This includes patterns of compliance, sexual receptivity, and nurturing traits.<sup>79</sup> Defined against hegemonic masculinity, emphasized femininity therefore functions as a cultural ideal propagating the social control of women's bodies as a necessary and desirable goal for both the protection of women and the satisfaction of men. Adolescence sees an intensification in feminine socialization for girls, not only in the form of increased policing of gendered behaviors, but in the form of increasing sexualized attention being directed toward their bodies.<sup>80</sup> As MacKinnon points out, the reduction of women's value to their sexualized bodies leaves no room for women's will or agency to even exist, let alone for it to be seen as legitimate. Instead, "[i]nequality itself, subjection itself, with self-determination ecstatically relinquished, is the apparent content of women's sexual desire and desirability."<sup>81</sup> To be appropriately and normatively feminine, then, is not only to lack an agentic sexuality of one's own, but to actively take on masculine sexual fantasies *as a form of female sexuality*.

In addition to the more explicit requirements of emphasized femininity, it is also vital to recognize that there is an unmarked standard of whiteness in its formulation. For girls and women of color, this often (if not always) means subjection to stereotypes of

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<sup>79</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, (1987), 24.

<sup>80</sup> Janet Shibley Hyde and Sara R. Jaffee, "Becoming a Heterosexual Adult: The Experiences of Young Women," *Journal of Social Issues* 56, No. 2, (2000): 283-296.

<sup>81</sup> MacKinnon, 2002, 39.

deviant femininity, and thus deviant sexuality.<sup>82</sup> These sexual tropes are only legible through the cultural lens of white supremacy: the animalistic, hypersexual Black woman, the fiery Latina, the quiet, diminutive Asian woman, and so on. All of these stereotypes require a standardized referent in order to be intelligible, and that referent is a culturally idealized, and *innocent* (that is, producing no sexual desires from within), white femininity.<sup>83</sup>

Low economic status comes to be another signifier of insufficient femininity for some women. Low-income femininities, as with many racialized femininities, are often depicted as sexually precocious and indiscriminate.<sup>84</sup> For poor girls in school, this may mean being labeled “at-risk,” a coded term used by teachers and administrators to mark girls for whom they believe certain forms of feminized delinquency are threats—particularly, unsafe and promiscuous sex, possibly leading to pregnancy.<sup>85</sup> For adult women, a number of class-based sexual stereotypes exist, such as the “welfare queen” who exploits her hyperfertility to abuse the social welfare system, and who is also implicitly racialized.<sup>86</sup> These conceptual foundations for the denigration of poor women’s femininity (and thus sexuality) position low-income women as particularly vulnerable, as the beliefs surrounding their deviance may collide with their economic and material needs in ways which preclude the exercise of meaningful sexual agency. However, for

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<sup>82</sup> Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” In *Sister Outsider*, by Audre Lorde, (1984): 114-123.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>84</sup> Jessica Fields, “‘Children Having Children’: Race, Innocence, and Sexuality Education,” *Social Problems* 52, No. 4, (2005): 549-571.; Garcia, 2009.

<sup>85</sup> Fields, 2005, 564.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 550.



women a high-income status does not signify a lesser deviation from feminine norms, but simply another sort.<sup>87</sup> Wealth is linked indelibly to masculinity, and within a capitalist patriarchy, this is only logical: if Man is women's provider and caretaker, and wealth the means of provision and care, then appropriate feminine subjects should have no need, nor desire, to accumulate wealth for themselves. In masculine hands, wealth sits destined to serve its purpose, and thus its accumulation is a virtue. In feminine hands, however, this link to virtue through paternity is lost, and instead questions are raised about women's goals.<sup>88</sup> Instead, wealthy women are often perceived as greedy and emotionally cold—a result of the violation of normative expectations about female caretaking responsibilities, and by extension, a failure to embody acceptable femininity.

Further, although the normative female role in the friend zone discourse involves romantic or sexual rejection, it should be noted that the rejection of a male's advances is itself an expression of desire, albeit not for the person in question. While abstaining from sexual activity is, generally speaking, an expectation of femininity (particularly in youth), this is largely a function of the broader expectation of acquiescence to paternalistic forces. Rejection, on the other hand, is antithetical to internalized assumptions of a submissive female heterosexuality. Considering this, the point at which a man or boy perceives himself to be entering the friend zone can simultaneously be understood as the moment at which the woman or girl he is pursuing chooses to wrongfully experience and

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<sup>87</sup> Dworkin, 1989.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

express her own desire, turning willful expressions of female desire into explicit transgressions against male power and privilege.

Thus, emphasized femininity facilitates the construction and maintenance of the friend zone discourse by providing guidelines for what behaviors are appropriate for women (therefore garnering social rewards) and what behaviors are not (therefore justifying negative consequences). For men and boys who internalize these ideals, women and girls who transgress appropriate feminine behaviors of deference and sexual availability can be interpreted as “bad” and therefore as deserving of disrespectful, even violent, treatment, which may be the case for men who perceive themselves to have been relegated to the friend zone. For girls and women who internalize these ideals, social and sexual scripts mandate compliance with emphasized femininity’s sexual submissiveness, while the expression of sexual desire is framed as both dangerous *for* and *because of* female sexuality. This has implications for the friend zone discourse given that, as described above, the heterosexual rejection of male romantic or sexual advances can and should be understood as the unsanctioned exercise of female sexual agency.

#### **COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY**

Compulsory heterosexuality, identified by feminist poet and theorist Adrienne Rich, is a product of the heterosexual mandate laid out by the sexual scripts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, framing all men and all women as necessarily and naturally heterosexual.<sup>89</sup> However, it is important to note that this heterosexuality encompasses an ambivalence toward women and girls, discussed in greater detail in

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<sup>89</sup> Rich, 1980.

chapter 3, which inexorably links love with power, desire with force, and intimacy with domination.<sup>90</sup> Here, “gender and sexuality [have] become functions of each other,”<sup>91</sup> such that, while they are not the *same*, they are linked so indelibly as to be inseparable for all practical purposes, and “male sexuality” and “female sexuality” become stand-in terms for aggressive, insatiable sexuality and passive, deferential sexuality, respectively.

That sexuality is something “precultural and universally invariant”<sup>92</sup> has been long believed, and has subsequently served to explain and justify myriad acts of sexual aggression and antagonism enacted by men upon women. However, the recognition of heterosexuality as an institution, rather than as an innate condition of being, is vital to the intelligibility of its compulsory nature. In the collective social creation of a purportedly natural heterosexuality, the condition is simultaneously foregrounded and made invisible, creating a normalized sexual standard from which only deviation draws any notice.<sup>93</sup>

For boys and men, compulsive heterosexuality dictates the internalization of the belief in, and the social expression of, a purportedly uncontrollable masculine sexuality. Significantly, the social pressures associated with masculine norms are such that this hyper(hetero)sexuality is a “defensive heterosexuality,” formed at least in part as a reaction to both the general pressures of gender socialization and to the more specific pressures of peer-to-peer masculinity policing(see also chapter five).<sup>94</sup> In order to avoid social shame, as well as decreased social standing in their peer groups, boys are set up to

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<sup>90</sup> Pascoe, 2011, 179.

<sup>91</sup> MacKinnon, 2002, 42.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>93</sup> Rich, 1980.; Tolman, 2002.

<sup>94</sup> Pascoe, 2011, 181.

develop and engage in aggressive sexual talk and behaviors regardless of whether or not these are reflective of their inner thoughts and feelings.<sup>95</sup>

For girls and women, the social shame of supposed sexual deviance is often only one facet of the potential repercussions of nonconformity from expected sexual norms. Importantly, in the context of the friend zone, this does not only include lesbian and queer girls and women, but can extend to anyone who actively rejects the romantic or sexual advances of heterosexual men. The norms of emphasized femininity “write [girls’] sexual desire, pleasure, and agency out of normal female behavior,”<sup>96</sup> meaning that compulsory heterosexuality not only compels women to make heterosexual romantic and sexual choices, but to actually surrender their sexual agency to the decision-making processes of heterosexual men and boys. In keeping with the compulsory nature of the heterosexual dynamic, girls and women are incentivized to maintain this compliance with sexual terror—the ever-present, looming threat of emotional, physical, and sexual violence.<sup>97</sup>

Compulsory heterosexuality is integral to the construction of the friend zone, as its very conceptualization is based upon the assumption that any man can and should have sexual access to any woman, especially if he is willing to work hard to get her. In particular, it functions within the pressures of hegemonic masculinity, compelling young men to provide evidence of heterosexual prowess in order to alleviate these pressures.

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<sup>95</sup> Pascoe, 2011, 181.; Tolman et al., 2003, 167.

<sup>96</sup> Tolman, 2002.

<sup>97</sup> Rich, 1980.; Sheffield, 1994.

### **Chapter 3: “Where men get sent for the sin of respect”<sup>98</sup>: *Ambivalent Sexism in the Friend Zone***

Ambivalent attitudes toward women and girls pervade society at every level, with most stereotypical ideas about them demonstrating a dichotomous conceptualization of who and what they are capable of being. The concept of ambivalent sexism describes the both negative and (subjectively) positive social attitudes that make up these foundational stereotypical beliefs about who women are and what they want.<sup>99</sup> This ambivalence is an amalgamation of two complementary components, benevolent and hostile sexism. These components function with and against each other to not only maintain an unequal sexual status quo but also to justify it. This is achieved by constructing a dichotomized view of women as group, which is then used to create either positive or negative stereotypes of women and prescribe appropriate rewards or consequences based on these.<sup>100</sup> In doing this, women’s agency is severely circumscribed in myriad ways.

#### **BENEVOLENT SEXISM**

Benevolent sexism consists of a set of beliefs that take a subjectively positive but simultaneously restrictive perspective on women, characterizing them as “pure creatures who ought to be protected, supported, and adored and whose love is necessary to make a man complete.”<sup>101</sup> Despite the intended appearance (and perhaps even the honest perception) of these traits as positive, in reality it is the grounding of these traits in

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<sup>98</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, 2016, entry 55.

<sup>99</sup> Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, "The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, No. 3, (1996): 491-512.; Glick & Fiske, 2001.

<sup>100</sup> Glick & Fiske, 2001.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

communally-oriented values which ultimately locates women's worth in their capacity for warmth and deference, and thus also in their continued social and sexual subordination.<sup>102</sup> In fact, this subordination is typically framed as a paternalistic, protective measure that is necessary to their well-being.<sup>103</sup> Those who endorse benevolent sexist beliefs will typically continue to ascribe positive, nurturing traits and offer this "protection" to women so long as said women abide by these limitations.<sup>104</sup>

In the context of the friend zone, benevolent sexism is expressed primarily *before* the desiring party's intentions are made clear to the object of his affection. Throughout the duration of the relationship prior to the desiring party's admission of romantic or sexual attraction, benevolence is deployed (to varying degrees, no doubt) in order to attempt to win the desired party's affection. As such, in the friend zone discourse, men's benevolent behavior toward women is not initiated as an honest act of friendship, but rather as an attempt to seduce, or worse, indebt, girls and women into romantic and sexual relationships in which they have expressed no interest of their own.

## **HOSTILE SEXISM**

Hostile sexism consists of the set of beliefs and behaviors most seen as antagonistically sexist. This perspective frames gender relations as adversarial, "in which women are perceived as seeking to control men, whether through sexuality or feminist

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<sup>102</sup> Glick & Fiske, 2001.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.; Nathalie Delacollette, Muriel Dumont, Marie Sarlet, and Benoit Dardenne, "Benevolent Sexism, Men's Advantages and the Prescription of Warmth to Women," *Sex Roles* 68, (2013): 296-310.

<sup>104</sup> Glick & Fiske, 2001.

ideology.”<sup>105</sup> Often, hostile sexist attitudes emerge when women violate the roles ascribed by benevolent ideologies.<sup>106</sup> Once this has occurred, the woman in question can be reframed as cold and manipulative, and thus no longer deserving of the “protection” of benevolence (and perhaps even deserving of punishment).

In the context of the friend zone, hostile sexism is typically expressed openly only *after* the object of unrequited affection has made clear her platonic intentions. Following romantic or sexual rejection, the benevolent dimensions of the relationship, predicated on a mere façade of mutual respect, fall away. Significantly, this ambivalent shift need not mean the beginning of open antagonism, but may be expressed in a variety of ways, such as everyday acts of sexual violence that are trivialized to the point of normalcy when it comes to cross-gender relationships, such as verbal or physical sexualized teasing.<sup>107</sup> However, this restraint from open hostility does not preclude the application of internalized hostilities. These hostilities are largely encompassed by the sexual myths described in chapter four, framing women as selfish and ungrateful, and allowing for any sexual violence which they experience to be understood as not only unsurprising, but deserved.

#### **THE FRIEND ZONE: AN AMBIVALENT CONSTRUCT**

As shown in this chapter, benevolent sexism constructs acceptable parameters for “good” womanhood and incentivizes compliance with them, while hostile sexism serves to punish those who dare to stray from the single appropriate path laid out for them. The

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<sup>105</sup> Glick & Fiske, 2001, 109.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Kelly, 1987.

discourse of the friend zone is a direct product of this misogynistic ambivalence; indeed, it resides in the liminal space between benevolence and hostility, and is invoked only once the boundaries of normative feminine (hetero)sexuality have been breached. The narrative of the friend zone is the narrative that good, deserving men stand to be unfairly rejected by selfish, ungrateful women.

Further, the ambivalent push and pull of the friend zone discourse propels a cycle wherein the legitimacy of the friend zone is validated because hostility toward women has been naturalized into an expected outcome of romantic rejection and further ambivalent beliefs themselves are simultaneously bolstered, as the very existence of a widespread friend zone discourse can be perceived to (conceptually) validate its foundational assumptions.



## Chapter 4: “[T]here may be deception on the part of the female”<sup>108</sup>: *The Sexual Mythology of the Friend Zone*

### FOUNDATIONAL MYTH: MEN & WOMEN ARE INHERENTLY DIFFERENT

A number of myths about gender and sexuality converge in the discourse of the friend zone. The unchallenged acceptance of these myths, all rooted in a primary essentialist myth that natural and inevitable differences exist between men and women, is central to understanding the structure of the friend zone, both as a general social construct and as a site of sexual violence.<sup>109</sup> While the majority of these myths overlap to varying extents, it is important to understand the dimensions and particularities of the ways in which each of them uphold hierarchies of power and agency so that we might be able to understand the ways in which they function together in the discourse of the friend zone.

These myths need not be articulated or endorsed directly by an individual in order to have a profound impact on one’s perceptions and beliefs about gender and sexuality. Instead, these myths often function implicitly, as social theories developed in youth as a means of “organizing knowledge about [one’s] own experiences and behavior, as well as that of others.”<sup>110</sup> Given that this integration of mythology and social information occurs involuntarily, the acceptance and perpetuation of these myths do not represent a conscious male conspiracy against women, but rather they speak to the more deeply ingrained and institutionalized inequalities of gendered sexuality.

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<sup>108</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, 2016, entry 112.

<sup>109</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002, 394.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

**“WHETHER OR NOT SHE IS TELLING THE TRUTH BECOMES IRRELEVANT”<sup>111</sup>: WOMEN ARE UNKNOWABLE**

Subsequent to the belief in innate differences between men and women is the belief that, on account of these differences, women’s thoughts and desires are entirely unpredictable and indecipherable to men.<sup>112</sup> At best, this myth might be understood as an assumption that women are naturally erratic, emotional, impulsive, and irrational. At worst, endorsement of this myth may be expressed as a deeply-held belief that women are selfish, dishonest, and manipulative.<sup>113</sup> Compounded by compulsory heterosexuality and sexual objectification, the myth that women are unknowable sets up every denial or rejection to be interpreted as “an invitation for increased effort, because...resistance is construed merely as a variant of socially scripted foreplay.”<sup>114</sup> Here, heterosexual relationships are framed competitively, incentivizing boys and men to “win” through aggressive persistence.<sup>115</sup>

In the context of the friend zone, women’s desires and intentions are virtually *always* constructed as necessarily unknowable, an invented mysteriousness which conveniently fosters the male belief that any and all women may currently be or eventually become romantically or sexually interested in them. This assumption functions with the myth of masculine entitlement, described in further detail below, to promote a gendered social atmosphere in which all women are perceived as potentially available to all men. Men’s perception of this atmosphere has implications for sexual violence, as

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<sup>111</sup> Friend Zone, 2016, entry 46.

<sup>112</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002, 394-395.

<sup>113</sup> Cohan, 2009, 165.

<sup>114</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002, 396.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 394.

masculine ideals dictate that men react aggressively when denied that which they believe to be their birthright, regardless of women's reasons for rejecting them (which are always already potentially deceitful).

**“[L]IKE PUTTING A CARROT ON A STICK IN FRONT OF A HORSE”<sup>116</sup>: WOMEN ARE SEXUAL OBJECTS**

A woman is sexually objectified when her physical body or body parts are viewed and evaluated as separate from her own internal sense of personhood, the existence of which is disregarded by the observer entirely.<sup>117</sup> In conjunction with a belief in innate gender differences, sexually objectifying beliefs about women preclude their ability to be seen as fully human by the men who endorse these views. This belief also frames women's very existence as centered around the needs and desires of men, given that objects have no needs of their own.<sup>118</sup> However, rather than women's objectification resulting in the perception of a female asexuality which merely attends to men's sexual desires, it instead results in the full projection of men's sexual desires onto female sexuality.<sup>119</sup> MacKinnon takes this further, suggesting that the experience of sexual objectification, in which women are defined by others' desired sexual uses, is itself a form of sex, as it exists and is defined by patriarchal standards.<sup>120</sup>

This has clear implications for the occurrence of sexual violence, as the simultaneous removal of women's (perceived) agency and the projection instead of

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<sup>116</sup> Friend Zone, 2016, entry 22.

<sup>117</sup> Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012.

<sup>118</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002.

<sup>119</sup> MacKinnon, 2002.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 40.

men's desires onto women's bodies can lead to the misattribution of sexual motives to women's nonsexual behaviors (such as those often expressed in the context of friendship).<sup>121</sup> This myth emerges in the discourse of the friend zone in men's expectation that women should acquiesce to their romantic and sexual desires, and culminates in the negative sentiments expressed by men who are sexually or romantically rejected, compounded by the male entitlement myth, described below.

A distinct iteration of the woman as sexual object myth is the "gatekeeper theory,"<sup>122</sup> wherein women's sexual consent functions as a "gate" which she can be persuaded to open in order to allow a man sexual access.<sup>123</sup> This belief employs both benevolent and hostile attitudes toward women, although a common feature is the assumption that an initial denial of sexual access can be effectively overturned if the man is willing to put in additional time, effort, or resources—an assumption which has clear implications for sexual violence, bearing a striking similarity to the strategy of "working a yes out" that Sanday identifies in *Fraternity Gang Rape*.<sup>124</sup> However, in the larger world of social interactions, these can be even more insidious than in small, insular social settings, as the more benevolent aspects of this theory are entirely consistent with beliefs about normative and acceptable heterosexual courtship behavior (e.g., men provide money and goods, and women provide sex and care work in return).<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002, 395.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 396.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Fraternity Gang Rape*, (1990).

<sup>125</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002, 397.

From a benevolent perspective, the gatekeeper myth can also manifest as a belief that women themselves are uncertain of their own sexual needs and desires, such that it may in fact be the *responsibility* of men to help them learn about their sexuality.<sup>126</sup> This has worrisome implications for concerns about sexual violence, as it positions men's disregard of feminine sexual agency as potentially helpful rather than harmful. Within the narrative of the gatekeeper myth, women's consent (or lack thereof) means little, and the violation of their stated boundaries is reframed as a necessary experiential dimension of heterosexual relationships.

While this dynamic likely permeates many social settings, this patronizing approach holds particular salience for youth, who are often still learning about themselves as sexual beings, and especially for girls, who are typically denied the means to explore and define their own sexualities in adolescence.<sup>127</sup> In the context of the friend zone discourse, this cultural script may be used against girls who express ambivalence or uncertainty about their romantic desires, offering boys an opportunity to "help" girls figure out what they desire sexually through the achievement of boys' own sexual desires. This predicament may be further exacerbated by cultural assumptions of youthful male virility and sexual knowledge, positioning boys and young men as the logical sexual educators of their feminine counterparts.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002.

<sup>127</sup> Tolman, 2002.

<sup>128</sup> Tolman et al., 2003.

**“[T]HE GIRL DOESN’T SEEM TO GIVE TWO SHITS ABOUT HIS SIDE OF THE STORY”<sup>129</sup>:  
FEMININE SEXUAL POWER**

Despite the apparent contradictions, the myth of feminine sexual power works with and against women’s sexual objectification in ways which legitimize misogynistic beliefs and obscure the heterosexualized pressures placed on girls and women to be accountable for the actions of men and boys (as well as, of course, their own). This myth holds that women have significant sexual power over men because they are naturally seductive, and because women have this power, men are largely unable to control whatever sexual urges they feel in response to this intentional seduction. Radical feminist writer Andrea Dworkin explains this logic in plainer terms: “erection is involuntary; a woman is the presumed cause; therefore, the man is helpless, the woman is powerful.”<sup>130</sup> However, she goes on to explain, this logic entirely obscures the fact that it is only through male institutions that women’s sexuality comes to be defined and understood.<sup>131</sup> This means that even when women do embody heterosexualized ideals, this has not so much provided them with power per se, but with some small measure of social capital, at best. Further, the potential value of any such social capital stands to be outweighed for many women by the onus placed upon them to avoid being subjected to sexual aggression and assault by the helpless men who are under their seductive spell.

This myth is supportive of the male perspective in the friend zone discourse, legitimizing the belief that male desire is the fault of women, and that women who provoke desire should expect that men will act upon it. The cultural ubiquity of this myth and its inevitable internalization create conditions which may obscure the coercive nature

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<sup>129</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, 2016, entry 94.

<sup>130</sup> Dworkin, 1989, 22.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

of men's sexual behavior and raise questions about personal accountability in the face of such unwanted sexual attention for girls and women.

**“[M]EANS THAT THE WOMAN IS TOO STUPID TO FIGURE OUT THIS IS USUALLY THE BEST GUY TO BE WITH”<sup>132</sup>: MASCULINE ENTITLEMENT**

The myth of masculine entitlement extends far beyond the realm of sexuality, though sexual entitlement is its most salient dimension with regard to an analysis of the friend zone. From a benevolent perspective, this myth is more often expressed as a belief in men's natural entitlement as it relates to a romantic or sexual contract, in which entitlement is earned by offering protection and other benefits to his female partner.<sup>133</sup> While the very existence of the friend zone precludes any explicit romantic or sexual agreement between parties, the friendship relationship can be understood to function similarly in men's perception. Understandings of the friend zone in media and online (see chapter one) describe few normative similarities with non-sexualized friendship, but describe scenarios in which boys and men attempt to seek sexual access to women by being kind to them in strategic ways, such as by spending time with them or buying them gifts. Following the logic of male entitlement, the feminine object should already be accessible to them, so these acts of kindness only serve to theoretically ensure, through purchase, female compliance with this male right to access (but for which compliance, significantly, is not a requirement). Women placed in the uncomfortable location of being perceived to owe romantic or sexual affection to a friend may have a hard time asserting themselves, particularly if they are young. The insidiousness of the friend zone discourse

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<sup>132</sup> Friend Zone, 2016, entry 96.

<sup>133</sup> Glick & Fiske, 2001.

lies in the expectation of and belief in a legitimate friendship on the part of girls and women, which stands to obscure the ways in which men may attempt to manipulate them emotionally. Under the pressure of the expectation to reciprocate for male kindness, as well as the empathy one might be expected to feel when a friend makes an emotional plea, girls are made vulnerable to sexual harassment, emotional violence, and sexual coercion and violence.

From a hostile perspective, belief in men's heterosexual entitlement holds that they have a right to sexual satisfaction on demand, regardless of women's desire.<sup>134</sup> In studying entitlement thoughts in sexual offenders, Pemberton and Wakeling have found that thoughts such as, "This is what I deserve," "[Y]ou ought to be grateful," and "She should have given me what I wanted" were often held by rapists and sexual murders at the time of their offense, suggesting a correlation between these thoughts and the perpetration of violent acts.<sup>135</sup>

In the context of the friend zone, hostile belief in masculine sexual entitlement is expressed as male disbelief or outrage in response to being sexually rejected by someone whom they perceive they have earned or to whom they otherwise deserve intimate access (as opposed to empathy). This response is exacerbated by the masculine norm of emotional stoicism, which encourages boys and men to dissociate from and suppress their expression of a range of emotions. When this occurs, boys not only limit their emotional

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<sup>134</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002, 398.

<sup>135</sup> Anna Elizabeth Pemberton and Helen Catherine Wakeling, 2009. "Entitled to Sex: Attitudes of Sexual Offenders," *Journal of Sexual Aggression* 15, No. 3, (2009): 289-303, 296.



expressions, but they are also disincentivized to consider or identify with the thoughts and feelings of girls and women.<sup>136</sup>

**“MEN DON’T HAVE PLATONIC FRIENDS”<sup>137</sup>: MALE SEXUALITY IS UNCONTROLLABLE**

Beliefs in hegemonic masculine ideals often include a belief in the male sex drive as a devastating force over which men themselves have little control.<sup>138</sup> In the absence of men’s ability to exert control over their own sexual desire, the burden of accountability falls upon the very objects of this desire.<sup>139</sup> In this context, women are implicated in any act of sexual violence to which they fall victim, as the logic of this myth functions so that it is seen as women’s responsibility to actively avoid provoking men’s (unwanted) sexual attention.<sup>140</sup> This belief has become so institutionalized that it is even taught in American public schools, as in the case of some abstinence-only sexuality education curricula.

Abstinence education lessons may include such messages as, “if you don’t aim to please, don’t dress to tease,” suggesting that it is the responsibility of teenage girls, not boys, to regulate boys’ perpetration of inappropriate sexual behavior.<sup>141</sup> This antiquated message about feminine modesty as a means of avoiding sexual violence refers back to the idea of girl as gatekeeper, leaving her with two apparent options: (1) strive to protect yourself

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<sup>136</sup> Beth A Quinn, "Sexual Harassment and Masculinity: The Power and Meaning of Girl Watching," *Gender & Society* 16, No.3, (2002): 386-402, 397.

<sup>137</sup> Urban Dictionary, 2016, entry 3.

<sup>138</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002.; Tolman et al., 2003.; Pascoe, 2011.

<sup>139</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002, 396.

<sup>140</sup> Hyde & Jaffee, 2000.

<sup>141</sup> Greenblatt, Jennifer L., "'If You Don't Aim to Please, Don't Dress to Tease' and Other Public School Sex Education Lessons Subsidized by You, the Taxpayer," *Texas Journal on Civil Liberties and Civil Rights* 14, No.1, (2008): 1-25, 10.

from sexual violence at all times, or (2) be a whore and see what you get. Benevolent sexism holds that for “good” women, this should be an easy choice.<sup>142</sup>

In the context of the friend zone, the function of this myth becomes more complicated. Given the friendship façade of the initial stages of a friend zone-doomed relationship, girls may have a pre-existing emotional investment, even if they do not have a romantic one. Romantic or sexual advances from strangers or unwanted persons are clear-cut and their decisive rejection may occur easily and with little deliberation, but when such advances come from a friend to whom one is endeared, the boundaries transgressed, as well as the appropriate response, is less clear-cut. This stands to complicate a decision-making process which is meant to function as a strict binary, leaving girls with no clear social script for how to articulate a genuine response. This puts girls in a vulnerable position, as miscommunication is commonly thought to be a frequent component of coercive sex that occurs in the presence of ambivalent emotions.<sup>143</sup> If this is this case, then the lack of an appropriate social script sets girls up to be misunderstood by a hopeful or overeager suitor, with the potential for dire consequences. However, Beres et al. have found in their research that 99% of first-person narrative stories from both men and women offered no support for this attribution of coercion to miscommunication,<sup>144</sup> and suggest instead that men exhibited “an apparent indifference” to whether or not their behavior was coercive.<sup>145</sup> If it is the case that male indifference is

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<sup>142</sup> Glick & Fiske, 1996.

<sup>143</sup> Melanie A. Beres, Charlene Y. Senn, and Jodee McCaw, "Navigating Ambivalence: How Heterosexual Young Adults Make Sense of Desire Differences," *Journal of Sex Research* 51, No. 7, (2014): 765-776.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 773.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 774.

a contributing factor in sexual coercion where girls and women feel ambivalent, then the friend zone's own ambivalent nature provides even more fertile conditions for these experiences than if shared miscommunication were to blame.

**“[G]IRLS ARE SHALLOW AND LOVE DICKWADS”<sup>146</sup>: “NICE GUYS” FINISH LAST & “REAL MEN” DON’T RAPE**

Narratives of the friend zone are rife with variations on the idea that “nice guys finish last.”<sup>147</sup> Here, the “nice guy” is essentially the embodied construct of ambivalent sexism, seemingly lavishing benevolence on the object his affection (in the context of platonic friendship) and merely reacting with appropriate anger and affronted entitlement when these actions are not met with compensatory romantic or sexual interest. As such, iterations of the “nice/good guy” are uniquely suited to play a role in the ambivalent realm of friend zone discourse.

Examples of the hybrid masculinities described in chapter one, “nice guys” and “good men” (the parameters of which are largely left undefined) do not, and perhaps could not, commit sexual violence against women, regardless of the wrongs done to them.<sup>148</sup> These men implement masculinized language about “real” manhood to devalue sexual violence as something enacted by men who are sick and cowardly, discursively distancing masculinity, and thus themselves, from the “bad” men who perpetrate sexual violence, even going so far at times as to self-identify as feminists.<sup>149</sup> Pascoe describes

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<sup>146</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, 2016, friend zone entry 43.

<sup>147</sup> Buchler, 2014.; *Urban Dictionary*, 2016.

<sup>148</sup> Michael A. Messner, "Bad Men, Good Men, Bystanders: Who Is the Rapist?," *Gender & Society* 30, No.1, (2016): 57-66.; Pascoe & Hollander, 2016.

<sup>149</sup> Bridges & Pascoe, 2014.

this strategy as “mobilizing rape,” wherein men decry sexual violence committed against women by “other” men, thereby reinforcing their own masculine dominance above both.<sup>150</sup> While this may appear to be at odds with the norms of masculine hegemony, it is in line with the suggestion that the maintenance of hegemonic status requires adaptability as social norms change over time.<sup>151</sup>

In the context of the friend zone, the identity of “nice guy” can therefore uphold the dynamics of gender inequality that facilitate the enactment and justification of sexual violence against (certain) women while simultaneously distancing himself from it, precluding him from being implicated in any such behavior himself. This functions to potentially discredit any accusations against him, particularly given the social inclination to give “good men”—or any men—the benefit of the doubt in such situations.

## CONCLUSION

These myths about the nature and the meanings of gender and sexuality work independently and as functions of one another in the production of the friend zone discourse. Founded in essentialist assumptions about men and women, these stories permeate hegemonic narratives about masculinity and femininity and frame the acceptable social scripts for their attainment. Further, these myths contribute to the friend zone discourse by legitimating men’s sense of entitlement, discrediting women’s capacity to make valid rejections, and encouraging and validating men’s disproportionate disappointment and outrage at these rejections.

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<sup>150</sup> Pascoe & Hollander, 2016.

<sup>151</sup> Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005.

## **Chapter 5: “If you’re stuck in the friend zone, it’s just as much your fault as it is theirs, if it’s not mostly your fault”<sup>152</sup>: *Masculinity Policing in the Friend Zone***

Much of the maintenance of masculine domination lies in gendered socialization processes. For boys and men, masculine homosocial groups and spaces are integral to the learning and internalization of hegemonic ideals.<sup>153</sup> From an early age, gendered socialization norms encourage boys to detach from and avoid identification with girls and women.<sup>154</sup> Instead, boys are expected to participate in the trappings of traditionally male camaraderie, such as playing sports or pursuing girls.<sup>155</sup> These homosocial relationships are expected to take primacy above all else, particularly relationships with women, despite a typical presence of marked heterosexism.<sup>156</sup> Paradoxically, from the purview of male homosociality, it is extended social intercourse with women which threatens a man’s heterosexuality, while homosocial settings provide boys and men with a space to reproduce ideologies of compulsory masculine heterosexuality.<sup>157</sup> Through this reinforcement of hegemonically masculine heterosexuality (see also chapter two), boys’ attitudes toward and beliefs about girls and women are necessarily shaped through a lens of difference, and are also heavily mediated by beliefs espoused from within the group.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, 2016, entry 36.

<sup>153</sup> Sharon R. Bird, "Welcome to the Men's Club: Homosociality and the Maintenance of Hegemonic Masculinity," *Gender & Society* 10, No. 2, (1996): 120-132.; Michael Flood, "Men, Sex, and Homosociality: How Bonds between Men Shape Their Sexual Relations with Women," *Men & Masculinities* 10, No. 3, (2008): 339-359.

<sup>154</sup> Bird, 1996, 121.

<sup>155</sup> Flood, 2008, 343.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>158</sup> Bird, 1996.; Flood, 2008.

This culturally-produced emphasis on male homosociality as an indispensable masculinity resource works in conjunction with the myth that women are unknowable to construct a social landscape in which half of the population has been excluded from men's potential pool of meaningfully intimate friendships. Given this overemphasis on the innate value of men and boys' homosocial relationships, a young man with a heterosexual love interest stands to lose doubly: not only may he find himself in the friend zone instead of getting the girl, but he may see his masculinity tarnished in the eyes of those whose opinions of him *really* matter—his male friends.

Masculinity policing can include “any action that serves to prevent or punish individual or group behavior perceived as insufficiently masculine.”<sup>159</sup> Men and boys thus utilize this set of behaviors to facilitate and regulate the construction and reproduction of an idealized hegemonic masculinity.<sup>160</sup> Paying attention to this set of behaviors is important in part due to its pervasiveness in boys' same-gender friendships and peer groups, which has a lasting impact on men's social behavior and understanding of masculine norms.<sup>161</sup> In particular, masculinity policing behaviors focus on driving heterosexual prowess and conquest, whether through encouragement and support or antagonization and homophobic teasing.<sup>162</sup> When heterosexual conquest is framed as a competition, it only becomes clearer that girls and women are seen as men's prey at worst, and prize at best. The threat of this competitive approach to sexuality among men and boys is compounded

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<sup>159</sup> Reigeluth & Addis, 2016, 75.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Bird, 1996.; Flood, 2008.; Cohan, 2009.; Jennifer Jewell, Christia Spears Brown, & Brea Perry, "All My Friends Are Doing It: Potentially Offensive Sexual Behavior Perpetration Within Adolescent Social Networks," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 25, No. 3, (2014): 592-604.

by the façade of friendship required in the discourse of the friend zone. While men's homosocial heterosexual competition is more of a social stereotype than a secret, the assumption of mutual respect and kindness which comes with friendship may assuage girls' skepticism of boys' motives, or even preclude it altogether. Further, assumptions of trustworthiness may even be used to explain away instances of sexual harassment and assault as a form of friendly play. The goals of masculinity policing in adolescence include the enforcement of male gender norms, the management of social status, and the strengthening of friendship bonds.<sup>163</sup> The enforcement of hegemonic masculine normativity is the most foundational and uncontroversial of these goals, as suggested by the entailing sexual pursuits.<sup>164</sup> In research conducted by Reigeluth and Addis, adolescent boys reported that this functions in both the short term and the long term, with its enactment intended to both produce immediate behavioral changes as well as long-term changes in both behavior and ideology.<sup>165</sup>

The management of social status is a goal which is directly linked to the embodiment of ideal masculinity in general, as high social status is itself an indicator of masculine success. However, gaining high social status necessarily requires the relocation of others into a lower-status category. Thus, boys and men use masculinity policing simultaneously to increase their own status while subordinating others', ensuring a cyclical (and thus perpetual) process of masculinity policing.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Reigeluth & Addis, 2016, 78.

<sup>164</sup> Flood, 2008.; Cohan, 2009.; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016, 78.

<sup>165</sup> Reigeluth & Addis, 2016, 78.

<sup>166</sup> Oransky & Marecek, 2009.

In the context of the friend zone, masculinity policing stands to embolden boys and men who already hold unequal views of gender and potentially to impart these views to those who do not yet endorse them. This policing also often directly encourages aggressive sexual behavior and persistent sexual pursuit,<sup>167</sup> which work in conjunction with boys' conditioned inability and/or unwillingness to empathize with girls to create a social discourse in which even girls' stated sexual boundaries (let alone those they may not feel comfortable asserting) may not be noticed, acknowledged, or taken seriously.<sup>168</sup>

### **THE INHERENTLY MISOGYNISTIC LOGIC OF MASCULINITY POLICING**

While dominant discourses within the peer policing process center on the proper execution of masculinity, there necessarily remains, whether explicitly or implicitly, a message about the value of femininity. In the process of masculinity policing, and indeed in society as a whole, femininity functions as a constitutive other to masculinity, creating restrictive boundaries around acceptable behavior for men and boys.<sup>169</sup> This construction works, and can *only* work, if femininity is positioned as entirely unacceptable in relation to men's normative behaviors.

Hegemonic masculinity's devaluation of femininity is, of course, also necessarily a devaluation of girls and women. This becomes extremely important in the context of sexuality, the surveillance and regulation of which is central to the policing of masculinity.<sup>170</sup> In addition, this primes boys to learn that their desires (their entitlement)

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<sup>167</sup> Cohan, 2009.; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016.

<sup>168</sup> Quinn, 2002.; Pascoe, 2011.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Jewell, Brown, & Perry, 2014.; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016.



are more important than those of girls, as well as that girls who are not “good” (i.e., compliant) can, and perhaps should, be punished in some way.

The misogynistic ideologies of masculinity policing set boys up to feel ambivalence toward girls; they are simultaneously compelled to desire and revile them. This supports the implication made by definitions online that boys who find themselves in the friend zone were, paradoxically, unable to see the value of being friends with a girl, even a girl from whom they expected romantic or sexual attention.<sup>171</sup>

### **EMOTIONAL REPRESSION**

While conforming to hegemonic masculine norms encourages men and boys to conceive of and present themselves to their peers as physically strong, this is only one form of strength valorized by hegemonic norms. Physical strength may allow for the demonstration of a quantifiable, and thus hierarchically classifiable, masculine trait in ways that may have few negative outcomes, but this is only one part of what constitutes the notion of masculine strength. In fact, the social value placed on emotional strength may often surpass that of the physical. Thus, one of the primary functions of masculinity policing is to emphasize the social value of emotional stoicism (see also chapter two).<sup>172</sup>In turn, it is the enactment of such stoicism that allows males to identify themselves and their peers as appropriately masculine. In contrast, failure to maintain

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<sup>171</sup> Urban Dictionary, 2016.

<sup>172</sup> Oransky & Marecek, 2009.; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016.

stoicism—almost regardless of the situation—is something that boys argue causes others to perceive them as “gay” or “girly.”<sup>173</sup>

Here, emotional strength is rooted less in resilience and more in emotional impermeability. Strength is not perceived as showing resilience following a trauma, but rather being indifferent to the trauma, being unfazed. Strength is not getting hurt in the first place. This attitude is captured poignantly by Sean, a teenage informant of Oransky and Marecek’s: “Some people think that it’s all right to be upset if a family member dies, but anything else, ‘You’re a pussy.’”<sup>174</sup> Whether or not this belief is endorsed privately, many boys state that acting out against the norm would invariably lead to ridicule and admonition from their peers, which research into the nature of male homosociality shows may accurately assess the stakes of emotionality in such settings.<sup>175</sup> Considering the significance of male homosociality as a masculinity resource, this pressure to display emotional stoicism or risk ostracization works to compel boys and men to comply with these norms of detachment regardless of personal investment in their ideological underpinnings.

In the context of the friend zone, this coerced emotional dissociation becomes a liability. As boys are not given the freedom to develop a meaningful sense of empathy for girls, they are less likely to know how girls feel or what they want, or even how to find out.<sup>176</sup> More worrisome, this detachment may lead boys to feel indifference toward how

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<sup>173</sup> Oransky & Marecek, 2009.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>175</sup> Flood, 2008.

<sup>176</sup> E. Ashby Plant, Janet Shibley Hyde, Dacher Keltner, and Patricia G. Devine, "The Gender Stereotyping of Emotions," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 24, (2000): 81-92.; Pascoe, 2011.

girls feel even when they do know, as both Quinn and Beres et al. have documented. In her study of “girl watching,” the homosocial performance of (hetero)sexualized surveillance of women’s bodies, Quinn identifies a “studied, often compulsory, lack of motivation to identify with women’s experiences.”<sup>177</sup> Furthermore, Beres et al. has found that “persistence is identified as occurring in response to resistance rather than communication,”<sup>178</sup> supporting the idea that sexual scripts function to guide men’s responses to rejection toward coercion and male domination.

### **COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY**

Compulsory heterosexuality is integral to the project of masculinity policing, as well as the friend zone more generally (see also chapter two). When placed within the context of a biologically deterministic ideology, the positive relationship between homophobia and masculinity becomes naturalized. In the production of the friend zone discourse, men and boys are supposed to be uncontrollably heterosexual. Heterosexuality, however, can only be defined against that which it is not, meaning that a masculine emphasis on heterosexuality can only result in an equal masculine emphasis on non-homosexuality, or rather, homophobia.<sup>179</sup>

Same-gender sexual harassment is harassment perpetrated by men and boys against other men and boys, and is one example of the behaviors which may be deployed

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<sup>177</sup> Quinn, 2002, 397.

<sup>178</sup> Beres et al., 2014, 772.

<sup>179</sup> Dworkin, 1989.; Pascoe, 2011.

in the name of policing masculine heterosexuality.<sup>180</sup> Unlike cross-gender sexual harassment, male same-gender sexual harassment is usually enacted to reinforce heterosexual normativity and bring shame to those who do not appear to embody its ideals (outcomes which subsequently bolster the masculinity status of the harasser.<sup>181</sup> It should be noted that this failure to embody the ideals of masculine hegemony will necessarily include all men, as these ideals are impossible to ever fully embody. Sexually harassing behaviors in the form of masculinity policing almost always include homophobic and misogynistic slurs and insults, which assert dominance while enforcing hegemonic norms of masculinity within a same-gender peer group.<sup>182</sup> Strikingly, if not shockingly, Renold has found that even primary school boys deploy sexist and homophobic language against peers for these norm-enforcing purposes.<sup>183</sup>

Significantly, from the dominant American perspective, to fail to be heterosexual is to fail at masculinity, which is to fail to be a man. Traditionally, to be a failed man is to be a *woman*. Although adolescents and adults both use homophobic slurs (and therefore homophobic sentiments) to police peers' masculinities, the ultimate message is not as simple as, 'don't be homosexual.' The message is, 'don't be feminine; don't be a girl.' This misogyny reveals again that the denigration of women is a vital aspect of the

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<sup>180</sup> C.J. Pascoe, "'Dude, You're a Fag': Adolescent Masculinity and the Fag Discourse," *Sexualities* 8, No. 3, (2005): 329-346.; Jewell, Brown, & Perry, 2014.; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016.

<sup>181</sup> Jewell, Brown, & Perry, 2014.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016.

<sup>183</sup> Emma Renold, "'If You Don't Kiss Me, You're Dumped': Boys, Boyfriends, and Heterosexualized Masculinities in the Primary School," *Educational Review* 55, No. 2, (2003): 179-194, 188.

development of normative masculine heterosexuality, and is particularly salient in the context of male homosociality.<sup>184</sup>

### **HOMOSOCIALITY, (HETERO)SEXUAL MYTHS**

It is in the foundational misogyny defined above that a dangerously ripe ground for sexual harassment, sexual coercion, and the acceptance of sexual myths are produced. The heterosexuality enforced by masculinity policing is characterized not only by the object of its desire, but also by the voracity of that desire.<sup>185</sup> This myth, which holds that “men’s sexual energy is difficult to control and that women have a key role in the loss of control,”<sup>186</sup> informs boys’ own perceptions of their sexualities, as well as the way that girls experience and interpret boys’ sexualities. In the context of the friend zone, boys’ aspirations to a virile heteromascularity become extremely vulnerable. while the aggressive and persistent pursuit of girls is incentivized. The desire to avoid vulnerability or the denigration of one’s masculinity is exacerbated severely in the context of male adolescent and young adult peer groups, in which boys often develop a “sexuality that is highly—in some cases, even exclusively—social.”<sup>187</sup> These conditions culminate quickly: the stakes of masculinity are high, boys are not supposed to be vulnerable, and girls are supposed to be compliant. The romantic and sexual expectations imparted upon men and boys by their privileged social location, compounded by their coerced

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<sup>184</sup> Cohan, 2009.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.; Jewell, Brown, & Perry, 2014.

<sup>186</sup> Polaschek & Ward, 2002, 397.

<sup>187</sup> Cohan, 2009, 174.

dissociation from a full range of emotional expression,<sup>188</sup> leave them unprepared to know how to deal with rejection when they had been told there would be none.<sup>189</sup>

Significantly, the myth of uncontrollable male sexuality also has an impact on the way that society, and girls themselves, perceive and interpret girls' sexualities.<sup>190</sup> Confronted with the widespread acceptance of this belief, girls are put in the position of having to develop a reactionary sexuality in order to protect themselves, entailing constant vigilance.<sup>191</sup> This contributes to the silencing of, and even dissociation from, girls' own desires, as these move to the periphery in the face of ever-impending sexual violence.<sup>192</sup>

#### **MASCULINITY POLICING'S REPERCUSSIONS FOR THE FRIEND ZONE**

In the context of the friend zone, the dimensions, as well as the products, of masculinity policing contribute to the potential risk for instances of sexual violence normalized by discourses of hegemonic masculinity. Coerced emotional dissociation conditions men and boys to ignore their own feelings, instincts, and empathy,<sup>193</sup> constructing a socially sanctioned emotional landscape wherein the needs of others, in addition to one's self, are unclear. Given this, frank communication about sex, sexuality, and sexual boundaries across gender becomes difficult. Further, the masculine policing of heterosexuality often encourages risky and degrading sexual behavior and language

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<sup>188</sup> Plant et al., 2000.

<sup>189</sup> Quinn, 2002.

<sup>190</sup> Tolman, 2002.; Beth A. Auslander, Michelle M. Perfect, Paul A. Succop, and Susan L. Rosenthal, "Perceptions of Sexual Assertiveness Among Adolescent Girls: Initiation, Refusal, and Use of Protective Behaviors," *Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology*, (2007): 157-162.

<sup>191</sup> Hlavka, 2014.

<sup>192</sup> Sheffield, 1994.; Tolman, 2002.

<sup>193</sup> Plant et al., 2000.; Quinn, 2002.; Pascoe, 2011.

toward girls and women. As within the functioning of the friend zone more broadly, the endorsement of sexual myths serves to legitimize girls' and women's sexual victimizations as natural and expected outcomes of their own inappropriate behaviors or attitudes, absolving men and boys of responsibility.

## **Chapter 6: “[T]errible fear, petrifying... Death”<sup>194</sup>: *Conclusion***

The friend zone discourse is constructed within the larger framework of a heterosexist tradition of gender essentialism and normativity. Within this framework, the endorsement of ambivalent sexist beliefs and the acceptance of sexual myths collude in ways that normalize sexist beliefs and sexual violence in specific contexts; a discourse of the friend zone emerges as a reviled social location wherein innocent, “good” men are trapped by capricious, seductive women, who then selfishly deny them the romantic or sexual relationship which they have rightfully earned.

The ambivalence of the friend zone is what makes its violent potential so insidious, as the benevolence of the precursory relationship functions to obscure the underlying motives and social realities, which are then excused as a natural male reaction to unjustified female rejection. In such a social context, instances of sexual violence become reasonable, culturally sanctioned, and even strategic reactions for men to carry out. Although an analysis of the dynamics of the friend zone in the context of real-life, idiosyncratic social relationships is beyond the scope of this report, I have shown that the social discourse of the friend zone contributes to a set of attitudes and behaviors which ultimately feed into a culture of sexual violence against women.

There are, of course, many limitations to the current analysis. Future empirical research should focus on explicating and understanding the friend zone discourse with greater nuance, particularly with regard to its practical applications and its negotiation in real-life contexts. In addition, future research should include space for understanding the

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<sup>194</sup> *Urban Dictionary*, 2016, friend zone entry 48.



intersection of the friend zone discourse with marginalized racial and sexual identities, as no apparent literature on this matter yet exists. Finally, research in the future should also examine the ways in which girls and women (and, perhaps, some men) resist the discourse of the friend zone.

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